

VZCZCXYZ0241
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHKB #1412 3320827
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 280827Z NOV 07
FM AMEMBASSY BAKU
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4332
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 0756
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA SZ NOV ANKARA 2478

UNCLAS BAKU 001412

SIPDIS

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SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [AJ](#)

SUBJECT: JEWISH LEADER CONFIRMS CEMETERY DESTRUCTION NOT TARGETED
AT PARTICULAR RELIGIOUS GROUPS

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED; NOT FOR INTERNET DISTRIBUTION.

¶1. (U) Since August, the Azerbaijani press has carried periodic reports on the Baku municipality's plans to destroy a cemetery in the city's Narimanov district, as part of a new road construction project. The GOAJ is engaged in a massive road and infrastructure construction effort, and has been tearing down buildings and other structures throughout Baku as part of this effort. Based on local press reports, some religious groups in the U.S. have raised concerns that the cemetery destruction is targeted against Azerbaijan's Jewish community.

¶2. (SBU) In a November 21 meeting, Semen Ihilov, head of Azerbaijan's "Mountain Jewish" community (Azerbaijan's indigenous Jewish population), confirmed that the Narimanov district cemetery contains graves of Jews, Christians and Muslims and said that the destruction of the cemetery is not targeted against particular religious groups. He added that the Narimanov cemetery historically has not been considered as a predominantly Jewish cemetery and that there are only eight or nine Jewish graves in the site. According to Ihilov, the Mountain Jewish Community has a separate cemetery in Baku.

¶3. (SBU) Ihilov believes that the Baku municipal authorities have not kept citizens adequately informed of the road construction work, thereby creating rumor and misinformation about the cemetery's destruction. According to Ihilov, Baku municipal authorities have created a formal process for citizens with relatives buried at the cemetery to receive compensation to move their relatives' graves. However, in Ihilov's view, this information was disseminated somewhat late in the process. Ihilov stressed that any problems related to the cemetery were not targeted at the Jewish community but, in his view, were due to the GOAJ's still-emerging efforts to work with concerned citizens on municipal construction projects.

¶4. (SBU) In a sign that the GOAJ recognizes that it may have mismanaged this issue, Baku municipal authorities announced on November 20 the creation of a special commission "on cleaning and setting order in the city's cemeteries." The commission consists of 19 prominent political, cultural and religious leaders, including the Mayor of Baku and leaders from the Muslim, Russian Orthodox, Gregorian (Armenian) and Jewish religious communities, including Ihilov. The commission is charged with adopting the measures necessary to bring Baku's cemeteries into proper conditions and to develop an electronic registry for all graves.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: Baku is in the midst of a building boom, with extensive private and public construction underway throughout the city, fueled by Azerbaijan's projected USD 200 billion in energy revenue. The GOAJ's handling of this building boom -- particularly problems with forced evictions and closure of small commercial enterprises -- is resulting in small, ad hoc protests by citizens who feel that they were ill-informed or that their property rights have been violated. Public grumbling over the destruction of the

Narimanov cemetery appears to be yet another example of ordinary citizens' concern over the manner by which the GOAJ is implementing new construction projects. GOAJ destruction of the cemetery does not appear in any way to be targeted against particular religious groups.

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